

Dignified Position of Woman in Religion and Society

-as seen through Buddhism

Indian culture, from very early times, appears to recognize woman as the matrix of society. Even the Rg. Veda [X. 85.46] recognizes her rightful place in the home as the newly-wedded wife. In the Surya's Bridal Hymn a prayer is offered that she may reign supreme over all her in-laws, father, mother, sister and brother. Her role as mother of children is extolled and it is wished with eagerness that she presides over the arrival of grandchildren too. Even in India she does not appear to have been divorced from her position as progenitor. Being stigmatized as ritually impure, the woman is nevertheless drawn in to participate in sacrifices, even through humiliating concessions, for in her absence the very existence and perpetuation of mankind is threatened.

The first expression of fair play towards woman as an equally privileged member of the human community is seen in the Manusmriti [IX. 96] where it is said that woman was created as the progenitor and man as the perpetuator of the human species and as such a common dharma has been laid down for man and woman: *Tasmād sādharmaṇo dharmah saha patnyā udīritah*. With the growth of so-called religious institutions and the build-up of priestly power, it is true that the social and religious position of woman in India has witnessed a lamentable corrosion. She has come to be ranked with the *Caṇḍāla* [i.e. the socially most despised] and the ill-omened raven. Surprisingly enough, even the Manusmriti we quoted above, rejects a woman's right to ascend to heaven by her own religious striving. A woman has no right of religious observances, it is said, no fast, no sacrifices. The glory of heaven is only for the woman who subserves her husband [*Patim susrusate yena tena svarge mahīyate* . Manu.5.153].

At the time of the appearance of Buddhism in India, these fluctuations in the fortunes of woman were a reality and the exploitation of woman had reached an

irritating high water mark. A rebuking Mara, reflecting the contemporary non-Buddhist views about the social and religious standing of woman, scoffs at Bhikkhuni Soma who as a nun was striving for self-liberation (S.I.129). Spiritual heights are to be attained only by sages [*isīhi pattaḅbaṃ*], says Mara, implying specifically a male domination in the sphere of religion. This is unmistakably indicated in the rest of the remarks which say that a woman with her two-finger wisdom cannot ever hope to reach such spiritual heights [*na tvaṃ dvaṅgulapaññāya sakkā pappotuṃ itthiyā*].

Thus, at the time of the appearance of Buddhism, the Indian woman who earlier had occupied, on her own right, a prestigious position had sunk to a lamentable low. In childhood, in marriage and even in widowhood, the female in society was under the vigil of the male, thus most often being robbed of her initiative and originality. This was unquestionably an unwarranted subordination. This attitude had swept thorough the entire Indian society, reaching as high as the social elite. Even King Pasenadi Kosala had to be reminded by the Buddha of the fallacy of this assumption. This King who was saddened on the news of the birth of a daughter was told by the Buddha that if a girl were properly groomed to play her role in society efficiently, on that skill of her alone she would outshine men.

Itthī pi hi ekacciyā seyyā posā janādhipa.

Medhāvinī sīlavaṭī sassudevā patibbatā.

S.I.86

Some women would, in their perfected feminine role, even excel men. Endowed with wisdom and virtue, she is chaste in her domestic behaviour as loyal wife, observing conjugal fidelity as the highest virtue in her married life, and holds in high esteem her husband's parents as her own (*sassudevā*).

Chastity of woman, both pre-marital and within marriage is a solemnly guarded virtue in Buddhism, both in terms of lay Buddhist society and the Buddhist religion. But some students of religion and culture, apparently lacking in

a basic academic discipline, turn so wild in their generalizations as to declare: "For example, virginity and chastity in females are not associated with Buddhist ethics or doctrine; one consequence of this is that marriage is a secular affair in Buddhist Sri Lanka, whereas it is a sacrament according to Brahmanic values." [Gananath Obesekera: *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*, Chicago, 1984. p.445]. Any Sri Lankan who is not denuded of his cultural heritage through any process of alienation, has to be aware of the fact that virginity and chastity in females, coupled with the idea of conjugal fidelity [for all of which the males in the society are equally held responsible] are all well saddled in the five basic precepts or *pañcasīla* of the Buddhists. Thus it is very much associated, or better say contained in Buddhist ethics and doctrine. One has to be adequately guarded against such situations of misdirection and misrepresentation generated by groups of neo-scientific analysts who at times appear to be playing with far too many words.

Thus according to Buddhism the woman is respected and loved as an indispensable component of society, starting from her basic role as progenitor and spreading over leadership and guidance in the bringing up of children, care of the total household including the domestic aids, and the administration of finances. One needs only glance through a text like *Matugama Samyutta* (S.IV.238 ff) to appreciate the full role a woman is expected to play in religion and society, a role which is complementary to that of man.

In the service of religion, it is once again the exemplary life of those who have opted to renounce the world and take to a full-time religious career in earnest, whether they be male or female which should be held out as a model. They alone, and not the propagandists, serve the cause of religion. They teach by example, with a convincing depth of understanding. What *Vaddhamata* [Thig.v.204 ff] tells her son about the unending stresses and strains of life or what *Uppalavanna* tells about the ensuing foulness in the pursuit of sense pleasures [Ibid.v.224 ff] are eternal sermons which can be repeated and reproduced without

any loss of their charm and vibrancy. A few such women must emerge in society. To make the men more gentle, that is to make gentlemen of them, to wean them from such corrosive habits like proneness to drinking and gambling, the women of this country could play a marvellously efficient role. They must reaffirm the adequacy of pleasure in the home, in terms of food and drink, sex and emotional gratification as parents of growing up healthy and promising children. We consider a resetting of the approach to cooking and eating in the home, what one cooks and how one does it, how one serves it and eats it, delightfully and dexterously, would go a long way in this direction. Now is the time to re-tap and re-harness the resourcefulness of our women in its totality for the good of everyone. We need them very much today. We have to appreciate the possible leadership they could provide. Such women would be the *primus inter pares* even in a society where people speak of women's lib, not only for equality with men for women but also for the possibility to outdo the male of the species, when and wherever he nods at his desk.

These brief remarks are made with a view to introducing the true Buddhist concept of woman, what she should symbolize and what she should stand up for, with the primary awareness that everyone of these champions should first qualify themselves for the task.

*Attānaṃ eva paṭhamam patirūpe nivesaye
athaññam anusāseyya na kilisseyya paṇḍito.*

Dhp.158

Let one first establish oneself in what is proper, and then instruct others. Such a wise one will never be defiled.

We need a few more seminars on this subject, undertaken with honesty and a sincerity to serve a cause. Being aggressive and vindictive, and ill-equipped with regard to necessary information, only leads to misanthropy. Let us help each other, with gentleness and restraint to reach, with the necessary detachment, the

data bank on these subjects which well deserve careful and closer scrutiny.

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